

8

Feedback, mistakes and correction

When our students say or write something, we usually respond in some way to what they have done. The right kind of formative feedback is one of the greatest contributors to student success, according to John Hattie (Hattie 2011, Hattie and Yates 2014), and, indeed, may have more effect on achievement than any other single factor (Black and William 1998).

There are many different ways of responding. We can, for example, give the students comments either on *what* they have said or written (the content) or on the form (*how* they said or wrote it). Sometimes we might respond to what our students say with praise or encouragement. At other times, when a student makes a mistake, we offer correction.

Teachers have to make instant decisions about what kind of feedback they should give when they see or hear their students' work. Should they respond to the content or the form of what the student has said or written? Should they praise the student's efforts and if so should they do it? How much should they correct student mistakes and when should they do it? These are the questions which this chapter addresses.

8.1 Giving supportive feedback

Many classroom exchanges between teachers and students look something like this:

<i>Initiating move</i>	<i>Teacher:</i>	<i>What did you do yesterday?</i>
<i>Response</i>	<i>Student:</i>	<i>I saw my brother.</i>
<i>Feedback (follow-up)</i>	<i>Teacher:</i>	<i>Good.</i>

This typical IRF (initiation–response–feedback) sequence appears to include, at the end, the teacher's *evaluation* of what the student has said. Such *summative feedback* (where the comment is about something that has happened) is in contrast to *formative feedback*, where teachers hope that what they say will help their students to do it better in the future.

However, there may be a problem with the teacher's feedback in this instance. In the example above, it is not clear what the teacher is saying *Good* about. *Good* might be a response to the student's correct use of the past tense. But it could equally be a positive response to the fact that the siblings met. It might, on the other hand, reflect the teacher's satisfaction that the student has made the effort to answer the question, or it might, finally, just be a stater general encouragement.

For praise and encouragement to be really effective it needs not only to be supportive but also to be specific. As Jim Scrivener argues, it should be work-specific: the teacher will explain what it was that the student did that was good. It should be truthful (not just 'empty praise') and it should encourage the students to think for themselves (Scrivener 2012: 285–9). Phrases like *Good* (as in the example above) and *Very good* don't seem to be adequate for this. According to Jean Wong and Hansun Zhang Waring (2009), *Very good* said with a typical falling intonation 'shuts the door on any future discussion because it acts as a kind of 'teacher full stop', which the students are unlikely to feel the need to say anything else.

Targeted praise – what Scrivener calls ‘work-specific’ praise – is extremely beneficial if delivered in the right way, however, and Wong and Waring suggest different phrases such as *OK* and *All right* delivered with a non-final intonation; these will, perhaps, have a better effect than the conversation-killing *Very good*, especially if the teacher makes clear what the praise is for. But praise is not the only possible feedback.

Indeed, the best kind of teacher follow-up may be those responses which are reactions to the content of what the students have said and which, perhaps, move the conversation forward. For example, we can show our students that we have listened with interest to their words (see Figure 1 below), by repeating what they have said (1), by commenting (2) or by asking follow-up questions (3). Perhaps we can *reformulate* what they have said to show / check that we have understood them (4), or we can ask them for clarification (5). These follow-up moves all reinforce the dialogue between teacher and students (see 4.3.1), but asking for clarification (5) goes further because it forces the students to think more carefully about what they are saying. Wong and Waring (see above) describe teacher follow-up moves like (5) as *pursuit questions* which give the student ‘an opportunity to support or defend his or her answer and to display confidence that what he or she has just said is correct or on target’ (2009: 200).

Student (Malgosia): Yesterday I saw my brother.
Teacher: You saw your brother. (1)
Student: Yes.
Teacher: That must have been nice. (2)
Student: Yes, very nice.
Teacher: Was he pleased to see you? (3)
Student: Yes, we are meeting by mistake.
Teacher: Oh, you met by accident. (4)
Student: Yes, by accident.
Teacher: So you didn't expect to meet him? Where was this? (5)
etc.

Figure 1 Teacher feedback

When Malgosia in Figure 1 says *we are meeting by mistake*, she is clearly using English incorrectly. The teacher reformulates what Malgosia says to make sure she (the teacher) has understood, and it seems to work, because Malgosia not only clarifies, but also self-corrects. We might ask ourselves, however, why she made that mistake in the first place and what other options the teacher would have to offer correction or push the conversation forward. These are the issues which we will now consider.

8.2 Students make mistakes

In his book on mistakes and correction, Julian Edge suggested that we can divide mistakes into three broad categories: ‘slips’ (that is, mistakes which the students can correct themselves once the mistake has been pointed out to them), ‘errors’ (mistakes which they can’t correct themselves – and which, therefore, need explanation) and ‘attempts’ (that is, when a student tries to say something but does not yet know the correct way of saying it) (Edge 1989: Chapter 2). Of these, it is the category of ‘error’ that most concerns teachers, though the students’ ‘attempts’ will tell us a lot about their current knowledge – and may well

provide chances for opportunistic teaching (see 13.1.1). Our response to student mistakes will depend on which kind we think they are making (see 8.3.1).

It is widely accepted that there are two distinct sources for the errors which most, if not all, students experience.

L1 'interference' Many students who learn English as a second language already have a deep knowledge of at least one other language. Where that L1 and the variety of English they are learning come into contact with each other, there are often confusions which provoke errors in a learner's use of English. This can be at the level of sounds: Arabic, for example, does not have a phonemic distinction between /f/ and /v/, and Arabic speakers may well say *ferry* when they mean *very*. It can be at the level of grammar, where a student's first language has a subtly different system: French students often have trouble with the present perfect because there is a similar form in French but the same time concept is expressed slightly differently; Japanese students have problems with article usage because Japanese does not use the same system of reference, and so on. It may, finally, be at the level of word usage, where similar sounding words have slightly different meanings: *librería* in Spanish means *bookshop*, not *library*, *embarasada* means *pregnant*, not *embarrassed*.

Developmental errors For a long time now, researchers in child language development have been aware of the phenomenon of 'over-generalisation'. This is best described as a situation where a child (with mother-tongue English) who has started by saying *Daddy went, they came*, etc. perfectly correctly suddenly starts saying **Daddy goed* and **they comed*. What seems to be happening is that the child starts to 'over-generalise' a new rule that has been (subconsciously) learnt, and, as a result, even makes mistakes with things that he or she seemed to have known before. Later, however, it all gets sorted out as the child begins to have a more sophisticated understanding, and he or she goes back to saying *went* and *came* while, at the same time, handling regular past tense endings.

Foreign language students make the same kind of developmental errors as well. This accounts for mistakes like **She is more nicer than him* where the acquisition of *more* for comparatives is over-generalised and then mixed up with the rule that the student has learnt – that comparative adjectives are formed with an adjective + *-er*. Errors of this kind are part of a natural acquisition process.

When second-language learners make this kind of error, therefore, they are demonstrating part of the natural process of language learning. Such developmental errors are part of the students' *interlanguage*, that is, the version of the language which a learner has at any one stage of development, and which is continually reshaped as he or she aims towards full mastery. Especially when responding to errors, teachers should be seen as providing feedback and helping that reshaping process, rather than telling students off because they are wrong.

8.3 Correction decisions

When a student makes a mistake, we, as teachers, have to make a number of decisions. The first of these is to decide whether the mistake itself needs correcting. If we think it does, our next decision is whether now is the right time to do it, or whether we should wait till later. Finally, we have to think about who is the best person to make that correction: the student themselves, the teacher, or maybe even the student's peers (his or her classmates).

8.3.1 What to correct

Among the many incorrect language features that students can produce are, for example, grammar mistakes (*He go to work every day*), pronunciation mistakes (*I don't like eschool*), vocabulary mistakes (*I did an error*), register mistakes (*Give me the book, teacher* – see 2.2) or any combination of these (*I want that you give me the book*). When this happens we have to decide if it is worth pointing out the mistake, and this will partly depend on whether we think the student has made an error or a slip. If it is the latter, we hope that just by having us point out that something has gone wrong, the students may be able to correct themselves. If our judgement is that the error is more deep-seated, then we have to decide if we want to spend time, at that moment, explaining something to try to cure the problem.

When students make more than one mistake, we have to decide which of these we want to focus on. It seems sensible to choose the ones that are either related to the language point the students are supposed to be working on, or that make the communication unsuccessful.

If we correct every single error that our students make, there may be very little time for anything else! Furthermore, we want to encourage our students to activate their language, whether in speaking or writing, and over-correction may well get in the way of this.

8.3.2 When to correct

Many teachers make a distinction between *accuracy* and *fluency*. In accuracy work (where the students are studying specific grammar or vocabulary, for example) the focus is on language forms. This is true for the presentation stages or for controlled language practice. Fluency work, on the other hand, is taken to mean the stages in a lesson where the students are focusing more on the content of what they are saying, and where they are doing their best to communicate as effectively as possible (see 3.1.4).

The general assumption is that whereas correction in accuracy work (sometimes called 'online' correction – see 8.4.1) is a 'good thing', interrupting students who are engaged in communicative activities (see 4.3) is less attractive. There are two reasons for this: firstly, it might interrupt their 'flow', and secondly, the act of communicating in itself helps the language learning process. As Tony Lynch argues, '... the best answer to the question of when to intervene in learner talk is: as late as possible' (Lynch 1997: 324). A solution is to use 'offline' correction, that is, working on errors after the activity has finished (see 8.4.2). However, as Paul Bress has suggested, both teachers and students are sometimes uneasy about the teacher's 'back seat role' during communicative activities (Bress 2009a: 56). It might also be possible that correction while the students are trying their best to express themselves is likely to be more effective – more noticeable – than it is at other times.

One possible solution is to offer 'gentle correction' during fluency work. What this means is that we may help the students to understand what is going wrong or prompt them to say something better, but we will not treat this as an opportunity for accuracy work (and have the students repeat correct utterances, for example). Instead, we will use our intervention as a way of helping them communicate better. Perhaps, then, reformulation is the answer (see example 4 in Figure 1), though as we shall see, there is some doubt about its efficacy (see 8.4.1).

8.3.3 Who corrects and who should be corrected?

When students make mistakes, it is often teachers who correct them. However, we are not the only ones who can do this. In the first place (as we shall see in 8.4.1), students are often capable of correcting themselves once a mistake has been pointed out, although this may depend on whether they have made a slip or an error.

Students can also be corrected by their peers, if and when they are unable to correct themselves. The teacher can say *Can anyone else help Yoshi?* if Yoshi can't see what his mistake is. But we have to tread sensitively here. If Yoshi is humiliated by the fact that his peers can do something he can't (and we have drawn attention to this), he may become very demotivated and, despite our good intentions, it might have been better if we had not involved his classmates. On the other hand, if we have helped to build a supportive atmosphere in the lesson, such peer correction can be incredibly helpful.

It can also be enjoyable! Wong and Waring (2009) suggest a light-hearted kind of peer correction, where the students hold up feedback signs (like voters on a TV show, perhaps) to show if they think something is right or wrong. Elspeth Pollock (2012) suggests cartoon-style booing and cheering or using mini-whiteboards in the same kind of way.

Sensitivity is required at all stages of correction, however. Before we start, we have to judge whether a student is in the right frame of mind to be corrected (either because of their personality or because of what they are saying), and then we have to adapt our approach to correction, depending on what we judge to be appropriate for that particular student at that particular time.

8.3.4 What to do about correction

What is clear, from the above discussion, is that giving feedback and correcting students is not a simple matter. The variables we have discussed (of mistakes, activity, student personality, etc.) make it a highly sophisticated and personal issue. That is why it is so important for us to be constantly aware of how effective our correction techniques are, and how they are received by our students. Of all the elements that make up classroom practice, correction is perhaps the one that most merits teacher reflection and action research (see 6.3.1). And because it is so personal, we may well want to ask the students what they feel about it and what they would like us to do – and to use this information to inform our teaching behaviour (see, for example, Harmer, P 2005).

8.4 Correcting spoken English

In this section, we will look at how we can correct our students when (or after) they are speaking.

8.4.1 Online (on-the-spot) correction

On-the-spot correction is generally more suited to speaking activities where the focus is on accuracy (see 8.3.2).

First, we indicate that something isn't quite right. This may be enough to make the student 'think again' and self-correct. Such self-correction often has a greater effect on uptake (the student's subsequent ability to use the language item correctly) than teacher correction (Li 2014).

We can show incorrectness in a variety of ways. For example, we can say *Again?* when a student makes a mistake, and accompany this with a quizzical facial expression (although we need to be careful of expressions and gestures which might have the potential to offend or make the students feel stupid). The rising intonation we use will indicate, too, that we are questioning the correctness of what they have said.

We can be more explicit than this and say, *That's not quite right. Can you try again?* Or, if we think the student needs more guidance to help pinpoint the problem, we might stress (and maybe echo) the specific area of the mistake, for example:

Student: Flight 309 go to Paris.
Teacher: Flight 309 GO to Paris?

Sometimes a hint is all that is needed. For example:

Student: I have many furnitures in my room.
Teacher: Countable?
Student: Oh yes. I have a lot of furniture in my room.

The last example used *metalinguage* (the jargon we use to describe grammar and vocabulary concepts); this can be useful – if, of course, the students know it.

We have already mentioned reformulation (sometimes called recasting) as a way of subtly showing the students how they could say something better. For example:

Student: She said me I was late.
Teacher: Oh, so she told you you were late, did she?

It is often believed that this is more appropriate and unobtrusive, especially during fluency work, than more direct intervention styles. The only danger, however, is that often the students don't actually pay attention to the implied correction, thinking instead, perhaps, that it is a content-based follow-up move of the kind we discussed in 8.1.

In all the procedures above, teachers hope that their students are able to correct themselves once it has been indicated that something is wrong. However, where the students are unable to correct themselves or respond to reformulation, we need to focus on the correct version in more detail. We can say the correct version, emphasising the part where there is a problem (e.g. *Flight 309 GOES to Paris*) before saying the sentence normally (e.g. *Flight 309 goes to Paris*), or we can say the incorrect part correctly (e.g. *Not 'go'. Listen: 'goes'*). We can use the board or fingers of the hand (see 13.2.1) to draw attention to the particular bit of the sentence which is causing the trouble. If necessary, we can explain the grammar (e.g. *We say I go, you go, we go, but for he, she or it, we say 'goes'. For example, 'He goes to Paris' or 'Flight 309 goes to Paris'*), or the lexical issue (e.g. *We use 'juvenile crime' when we talk formally about crime committed by children; a 'childish crime' is an act that is silly because it's like the sort of thing a child would do*). We will then ask the student to repeat the utterance correctly.

8.4.2 Offline [after-the-event] correction

If we decide not to intervene with correction during communicative and fluency activities – though we may still prompt and participate (see 6.2) – then we will have to do it afterwards.

One of the problems of giving feedback after the event is that it is easy to forget what students have said. Most teachers, therefore, write down points they want to refer to later. Some teachers make notes and write down what they hear; others go further and use charts or other forms of categorisation to help them do this, as in Figure 2.

Grammar	Words and phrases	Pronunciation	Appropriacy

Figure 2 A chart for recording student mistakes

In each column, we can note down things we heard, whether they were particularly good or incorrect or inappropriate. We might write down errors such as **according of my opinion* in the words and phrases column, or **I haven't been yesterday* in the grammar column; we might record phoneme problems or stress issues in the pronunciation column and make a note of places where students disagreed too tentatively or bluntly in the appropriacy column.

We can also record the students' language performance with audio or video recorders. In this situation, the students might be asked to design their own charts like the one above so that when they listen or watch, they, too, will be writing down more and less successful language performance in categories which make remembering what they heard easier. Another alternative is to put the students into groups and have each group listen or watch for something different. For example, one group might focus on pronunciation, one group could listen for the use of appropriate or inappropriate phrases, while a third looks at the effect of the physical paralinguistic features that are used. If teachers want to involve their students more – especially if they have been listening to an audio recording or watching a video – they can ask them to write any mistakes they think they heard on the board. This can lead to a discussion in which the class votes on whether they think the mistakes really are mistakes.

When we have recorded our students' performance, we will want to give feedback to the class. We can do this in a number of ways. We might, for example, want to give an overall assessment of an activity, saying how well we thought the students did in it, and getting them to tell us what they found easiest or most difficult. We can put some of the mistakes we have recorded up on the board and ask the students first if they can recognise the problem, and then whether they can put it right. In such cases, it is not generally a good idea to say who made the mistakes since this may expose the students in front of their classmates. Indeed, we will probably want to concentrate most on those mistakes which were made by more than one person.

An amusing way of directing the students' attention is to hold an auction where they are given a sum of pretend money and they have to spend it by buying sentences which they think are correct from a collection of some badly- and some well-formed ones. If they buy the correct sentences, they can keep the money they spent, but they can earn double the money if they buy incorrect sentences and then correct them.

Liz Dale and Rosie Tanner suggest correction cards: the teacher has written examples of both correct and incorrect sentences they have heard, and the students, in groups of three or four, are given sets of these cards – one for each group. The groups decide which (correct) cards to keep and the group with the greatest number of correct cards at the end wins (Dale and Tanner 2012: 241–4).

Another possibility is for teachers to write individual notes to students, recording mistakes they heard from those particular students with suggestions about where they might look for information about the language – in dictionaries, grammar books or on the internet.

Some teachers, like Elspeth Pollock (2012), add examples to a list of common errors which can be displayed in the classroom. This will work best if correct versions are also included in the display.

The purpose of 'after-the-event' correction is, of course, for the students to improve in the future, and common error lists, for example, are designed so that the students think about them (in order to avoid them) when they next speak. Thomas Stones went further than that, getting his students to transcribe their role-plays of doing an IELTS speaking test. They then corrected their own and each other's transcripts before the teacher checked their corrections and they role-played their speaking tests all over again – and this time they did considerably better. Stones' research showed, he says, that student self-correction was more likely to lead to uptake (Stones 2012: 29). Transcription takes time, of course, but the potential benefits are enormous.

8.5 Giving feedback for writing

Many of the issues that we have discussed when talking about giving feedback on student speaking apply to their written work, too, though there is, perhaps, less of a consensus about the best ways to go about it. For a start, we have to decide whether to give feedback on the *content* of what our students have written or whether it is the *form* of what they have written (how correct their grammar and spelling is, for example) that should occupy our interest. In the end, it may depend on whether we are giving feedback on a finished 'product' – in which case, our feedback may be *summative* (see 8.1) – or as part of a writing process – in which case, it may be *formative* (designed to help the students to do better in the future). In a sense, of course, all correction is formative, but this is especially true of process writing (see 20.2.1). More importantly, and in common with what we have said about correcting speaking, we must balance the criticism and suggestions we give with appropriate praise, provided that it is merited and the students know what they are being praised for.

8.5.1 Giving feedback in process writing

If our intention during the writing process is to help the students to produce, ultimately, a better final product, then we may want to think of what we are doing as responding or prompting rather than correcting. How can this best be done?

Process writing involves the students drafting and editing the writing they do – rather than going straight for a final product in one writing activity. Although not without its problems (see 20.2.1), getting students involved in the writing process has the best chance of making them better writers in English.

Hedy McGarrell and Jeff Verbeem suggest that we should focus on the student writer's content in their early drafts, demonstrating our enthusiasm and curiosity for what they are writing because by doing this the teacher 'strengthens the writer's resolve to plunge back into the tangle of disparate ideas in search of a consistent thread' (McGarrell and Verbeem 2007: 235). But others advocate the teacher offering imperative comments on the students' work as a way of provoking them to focus on language forms because that is what the students want (Shin 2008), and because such comments, according to Yoshihito Sugita, 'seem to be direct instructions which have a feeling of authority so that students pay a great deal of attention to teacher feedback, follow the instructions and follow the drafts' (Sugita 2006: 40). However, comments like this are 'more effective for treating errors in form than content' (Nurmukhamedov and Kim 2010: 281). It might be a good idea to experiment by

sometimes using content-based feedback, and at other times directing our responses towards the students' accurate language use. We could compare the results of these two procedures as a piece of action research (see 6.3.1).

What this brief discussion suggests is that when we intervene in the students' writing process, our principal task (whether we focus on form or content) is to respond to what the students are trying to say and offer them suggestions about how to say it better. This is very different in both tone and manner from offering correction on a finished written 'product', as we shall see below.

8.5.2 Using correction symbols

One of the most popular ways of correcting written work (when it is submitted on paper) is the use of correction codes to indicate that the students have made mistakes. These codes can be written into the body of the text itself or in the margin. Different teachers use different symbols, but Figure 3 shows some of the more common ones.

Symbol	Meaning	Example error
S	A spelling error	The <u>asnwer</u> is obvious.
WO	A mistake in word order	I like <u>very much it</u> .
G	A grammar mistake	I am going to buy some <u>furniture_s</u> .
T	Wrong verb tense	I <u>have seen</u> him yesterday.
C	Concord mistake (e.g. the subject and verb agreement)	People <u>is</u> angry.
∧	Something has been left out.	He told <u>∧</u> that he was sorry.
WW	Wrong word	I am interested <u>on</u> jazz music.
{ }	Something is not necessary.	He was not {too} strong enough.
?M	The meaning is unclear.	That is a <u>very excited</u> photograph.
P	A punctuation mistake.	Do you like <u>london.</u>
F/I	Too formal or informal.	<u>Hi</u> Mr Franklin, Thank you for your letter ...

Figure 3 Correction symbols

Using correction codes and symbols may not always be effective, however. It is, as David Coniam and Rachel Lok Wai Ting put it, an uphill battle: 'First a major issue is getting students to appreciate the grammatical concepts underlying the codes. Second is the eternal question of getting students to pay attention to the error codes written against their homework in anything more than a very superficial manner' (2012: 17).

If students are to benefit from the use of correction symbols, they first need to know what we mean so that they can do something about it. This involves training them to understand the process.

We might start by writing incorrect sentences on the board, such as **I don't enjoy to watch TV*. Students come up to the board and underline the mistake in the sentence (e.g. *I don't enjoy to watch TV*). Activities like this get them used both to the idea of error-spotting and also to the convention of underlining. Later, we can give them several sentences, some of which are correct and some of which are not. They have to decide which is which.

We can now introduce the students to correction symbols, going through them one by one, showing examples of each category. Once we think the students have grasped their meaning, we might get them to try using the symbols themselves. In the following example (Figure 4), the teacher has typed up some student work exactly as it was written by different members of a group. Students from a different group tried to use the correction symbols (see Figure 3) they had recently learnt about to correct the piece, with partial success:

Once upon a time, a ^{Sp}beautif princess lived in a castle by a river.
 She was very clever.
 She always read and studied.
 However, she ^{T/ww}hasnt seen the ^{Sp}gergous nature around her, where she was living,
 she had a ^{Sp}stemother that ^Thate her very much.
 She had a lovely dog.
 It was a very ^{Gr}loyalty.
 One day, her stepmother bought a basket of red apples from the local market.
 The stepmother ^{ww}putted poison in ~~λ~~ apples.
 Her dog saw what ^{ww}the stepmother ^Tdo, so, when the stepmother gave the
 apple to her, her dog jumped and ate the apple. Then, the ^P~~λ~~ dog died.

Figure 4 Students use correction symbols

The teacher then discussed the students' efforts with the class.

Once our students have had a good chance to get to know how to use correction symbols, we can start to use them when looking at their work. We will discuss this in 8.5.5.

Finally, symbols do not always have to flag up mistakes. Teachers use ticks, smiley faces and other 'approving' marks to indicate that the students have written well. Such positive feedback is always welcome; however, as we said in 8.1, our students need to know exactly what is being referred to, and also to believe that they deserve it.

8.5.3 Alternatives to correction symbols

There are other ways of giving feedback to students when they submit written work, apart from using correction symbols, many of which require less training or metalinguistic knowledge on the part of the students.

One possibility is to leave comments on a student's work, either at the end of the piece or in the margin. When work is submitted online, we can use annotation software to put comments at the side of a document or, sometimes, insert them in the text using a different colour. Such comments may offer praise and criticism or sometimes reformulated rewrites. However, a problem for teachers sitting at home, for example, and reading a student's work, is to know what the student was actually trying to say. As Obaid Hamid discovered, 'teachers' interpretation of learner intentions in idiosyncratic utterances is not always reliable' (Hamid

2007: 114). This is perhaps because we frequently find ourselves having to guess what the student was trying to say and then having to base our corrections on those guesses. But if we haven't guessed correctly, then our corrections won't have the desired effect. One way out of this dilemma is to express any doubts by saying to the student 'I am not sure what you are trying to say here' or 'Are you trying to say X?' Such comments, like Wong and Waring's pursuit questions (see 8.1) may be more useful than inappropriate approximations.

The ideal situation, of course, is to be able to sit down with the student in individual conference and go through his or her work face to face. In that way we can ask our questions, point out mistakes, offer correct forms, suggest improvements and discuss the content. Although this is time-consuming, it is sometimes possible if we can find other things for the rest of the class to do while we are offering this kind of tutorial service (see 6.2).

Russell Stannard (2008a, 2013a) reminds us that we can use screen capture software such as Jing and Camtasia so that our students can hear and watch us correcting at the same time. Screen capture software records what is on the computer screen and can record audio at the same time. In this way, the students can see us working with their scripts (using underlining and highlighting tools – because this appears on the screen and so is being recorded) and they can hear us explaining what we are doing or asking questions, etc. This seems like a good halfway house between individual conferences and marking at a distance.

One way of making feedback sessions more enjoyable – and perhaps provoking more student focus – is for the teacher to write comments (on different cards) about each student's work, and then put the cards on the board. When the students receive their writing back from the teacher, they have to go to the board and try to find the feedback which refers to them. Provided this is done sensitively, it means that the students all get to see a lot of feedback, which can only be a good thing.

8.5.4 Letting the students in

So far, we have discussed the teacher's feedback to the students. Students, however, can self-correct, and this is extremely powerful. Caroline Vickers and Estela Ene had their students look at a text with correct third conditional sentences in order to assess whether their own uses of the same structure were correct (and to rewrite them if they were not). The learning benefit, they discovered, 'suggests that learner autonomy is viable' (Vickers and Ene 2006: 115). John Anderson had his students collect and keep their mistaken sentences in the back of their notebooks. Once having corrected them, they could then use their previous mistakes as a checklist to self-edit future work (Anderson 2010).

We can also encourage our students to self-monitor by getting them to write a checklist of things to look out for when they evaluate their own work during the drafting process (Harmer 2004: 121). Icy Lee (2010) suggests that teachers and students together should decide on the criteria that should be used for writing correction. These criteria can then be turned into descriptive statements (or *rubrics*) to be used on a feedback form.

Whatever we do, however, it is extremely important that our students should know, before they write, what kind of feedback they are to be given. Without such knowledge, they have no way of knowing how they should write.

We can also suggest that students give feedback to each other. Such peer review has an extremely positive effect on class cohesion. It encourages the students to monitor each other and, as a result, helps them to become better at self-monitoring. James Muncie suggested a further advantage, namely that whereas students see teacher comments as coming from an

expert, as a result of which they feel obliged to do what is suggested even when we are only making suggestions, they are much more likely to be provoked into thinking about what they are writing if the feedback comes from one of their peers (Muncie 2000). In order to make sure that the comment is focused, however, we might want to design a form, like the one suggested by Victoria Chan (2001), where the students are given sentences to complete, such as *My immediate reactions to your piece of writing are ..., I like the part ..., I'm not sure about ..., The specific language errors I have noticed are ...*, etc. For Huahui Zhao, the key is appropriate teacher intervention strategies (including explaining peer feedback, discussing it and commenting on the feedback they give each other) to promote successful peer cooperation (Zhao 2014).

8.5.5 What happens next

'It's so unfair,' a teacher in Köln, Germany, once commented, 'I spend the whole evening marking papers and when I hand them back, the students just put them in their folders without looking at them!' It is easy to understand why she feels so frustrated, but she is not the only one who has wasted her time here! Written feedback is designed not just to give an assessment of the students' work, but also to help and teach. We give feedback because we want to affect our students' language use in the future as well as to comment upon its use in the past. This is the formative assessment we mentioned briefly at the beginning of this chapter. When we respond to first and second written drafts of a written assignment, therefore, we expect a new version to be produced which will show how the students have responded to our comments. In this way, feedback is part of a learning process, and is most assuredly not a waste of time. Our reason for using codes and symbols is the same: if our students can identify the mistakes they have made, they are then in a position to correct them. The feedback process is only really finished once they have made these changes. And if the students consult grammar books or dictionaries as a way of resolving some of the mistakes we have signalled for them, the feedback we have given has had a positive outcome.

When setting writing tasks, then, we should not only think about how long it will take us to mark them, but also how much time we will need to give the students to rewrite what is necessary.

8.5.6 Burning the midnight oil

'Why burn the midnight oil?' asks Icy Lee (2005) in an article which discusses the stress of written feedback for students and teachers. For students, the sight of their work covered in corrections can cause great anxiety. For teachers, marking and correcting take up an enormous amount of time (Lee found that the 200 Hong Kong teachers she interviewed spent an average of 20–30 hours a week marking). The situation is the same today, whether we correct on paper or online. Both teachers and students deserve a break from this drudgery.

There are a number of ways of improving the situation. These include:

Selective marking We do not always need to mark everything. If we do, it takes a great deal of time and can be extremely demotivating. It is often far more effective to tell the students that for their next piece of work we will be focusing specifically on spelling, or specifically on paragraph organisation, or on verb tenses, for example. We will have less to correct, the students will have fewer red marks to contend with, and while they are preparing their work, they will give extra special attention to the area we have identified. This is the view of Bitchener and Knoch (2009), and Rod Ellis goes further, saying that such *focused correction may prove more effective (than unfocused corrective feedback) because 'the learner is able to examine multiple corrections of a single error and thus obtain the rich evidence they need to both understand why what they wrote was erroneous and to acquire the right form'* (Ellis 2009: 102).

Don't mark all the papers Teachers may decide only to mark some of the scripts they are given – as a sample of what the class has done as a whole. They can then use what they find there for post-task teaching with the whole class. If we do this, we have to make sure that over a period of time everyone's work has its turn 'in the spotlight'.

Involve the students Teachers can correct some of the scripts and students can look at some of the others. As we saw in 8.5.4 above, peer correction has extremely beneficial results.

If we allow our students to help decide what writing tasks they have to do (rather than always being told by us), they are likely to enjoy their writing more, and there is a strong possibility that we will enjoy grading their work more, too. We can offer them alternative possibilities, such as writing a letter, an article, a blogpost or a speech, or we can get them to suggest what they themselves think would be useful and appropriate.

Chapter notes and further reading

Feedback and praise

Cullen (2002) discusses the teacher's 'follow-up moves'.

Caffyn (1984), discussed in Williams and Burden (1997: 134–136) showed how students resented praise if they didn't know why they merited it. See also Fielder (2011) on the qualities of good positive feedback.

Correction

For a short concise summary of some oral correction issues, see Li (2014). Brinton (2014: 351–353) discusses types of teacher feedback.

Lightbown (2014: 130), discussing CBLT – see 1.2.3 – says that feedback 'should target a *limited* number of language features' (my italics). Willis and Willis, controversially, suggest that correction is 'not nearly as effective as we would like to think' (Willis and Willis 2007: 122).

Auctions

On getting students to bid for English sentences in mock auctions, see Coniam and Lok Wai Ting (2012).

Transcription

Students' ability to identify and correct errors in transcriptions improved with practice, according to Stillwell, Curabba, Alexander, Kidd, Kim, Stone and Wyle (2010). See also Lynch (2001, 2007).

Correcting writing

For a comprehensive overview of research on error feedback, see Ferris (2011).

Editing in process writing

Marion (2009) believes we should 'relinquish the red pen' and train students to self-edit.

Types of written correction

Ellis (2009) offers a typology (and discussion) of written feedback types.

Digital feedback

Russell Stannard shares many training videos for using screen capture software at <http://www.teachertrainingvideos.com>.

Involving the students

Hedge (2005) discusses many ideas for having students decide what they want to be corrected on.

Video resource

Details of the video lessons and video documentaries on the DVD which accompanies this book can be found on pages vi–viii.